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ABSTRACT

Staff organization and training is essential for the production of superior college publications. The editor must be a leader with a vision and a propensity for hard work. The editor should be willing to take a firm, sometimes unpopular, stand to advance in the direction he or she wants to go. Once the editor has been chosen, the following things must be done: (1) style rules must be enforced, (2) distinct design patterns must be set, (3) deadlines must be strictly enforced, (4) specific job descriptions for each staff member must be outlined, (5) types of coverage must be decided, (6) a pattern must be set for making and evaluating assignments, (7) rules for travel to events must be made, (8) rules for staff participation in events covered by the publication must be set, (9) a specific editorial policy must be determined, (10) a staff meeting time must be set with penalties for not attending, and (11) short and long range goals for publication must be determined. Training techniques can include design manuals, style books, all day training sessions, and special intensive writing seminars. The editor should seek to keep staff morale high. Good staff organization and training start with the editor and his or her careful plans. (JF)

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Staff Organization and Training

Nancy L. Green

Sometimes staff organization and training could be called organizing a Chinese Fire Drill. Most often in the fall when the staff returns to start putting out a publication, they have little idea of what direction the publication is going to take. It appears to have grown like some untrained weed when it comes out each time.

With each new issue there is an uneasy feeling that things aren't right, something is missing, but the staff just goes on putting it out. Perhaps that is the worst problem with the publication. They're just putting it out. Of course, people want to do a good job but they aren't sure how. They become defensive about any criticism on the quality of content or appearance.

Why does this happen? Simple--the editor didn't do a good job of organizing and training that staff. Staff organization and training does not start when the staff returns in the fall. It begins in the early spring when the editor-to-be starts thinking about applying for the job--long before the selection process for editor and staff reaches its conclusion.

There is an old saying about the buck stopping here. In the case of the editor, that's where it stops. The staff will come and go, but the publication will always be known as John or Mary's year. John's paper or Mary's yearbook will always reflect how they set the standards for that publication. Show me the product, and I'll tell you whether John or Mary was a good leader and knew what the publication was and how it was to

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function.

Good editors know when they apply for the position what they want to achieve with the publication. They have already decided what the look for the publication will be, what the content will be, and how they will direct the staff to carry out those plans.

Poor editors tell people what they want to do, but they never spend the time and energy necessary to reach those goals. They think having a firm hand on the publication is unnecessary. They don't have personal standards for excellence and they can't communicate any direction to the staff. The poor editor either knows it all, really doesn't, and drives the staff wild with dictator-like approaches, or doesn't know much, doesn't try to learn much, and doesn't want to push the staff because he or she is unsure how the staff should move.

The first thing that every editor should be aware of is that once in the job, there is going to be a natural distance between editor and staff. The decision-making process demands that the editor will have to take firm, sometimes unpopular, stands to accomplish the directions in which he or she wants to go.

But that is the reality of the editor position. Direction, standards of excellence, goals for the staff, personal organization, adherence to personal and professional goals as the example for the staff to follow, are part of the editor role. If the editor is sloppy and without personal discipline, the staff can't be expected to have any discipline.

So let's go back to the plan for the editor. He or she has decided that, if successful in the bid to be editor, the following things will be done: there

will be an adherence to style rules for all editors and writers, there will be distinct design patterns that the publication will have that will make it functional and in some ways unique, there will be STRICT adherence to deadlines, there will be specific job descriptions for each staff member and those will be enforced, there will be definite types of coverage that will take place, there will be a set pattern for making assignments and evaluating them, there will be certain rules for travel to events, there will be rules for staff participation in events covered by the publication, there will be a specific editorial policy statement, there will be set meeting times for the staff with penalities for not attending, there will be short range and long range goals for the publication and staff during the year.

The would-be editor puts these on paper--a specific direction that he or she wants each department to take with plans for achieving that direction.

An example of this would be that the publication will be free from style errors. Therefore, before someone can become a copy editor, he or she must take and pass a style test which contains all the common style used by the publication. Reporters must also study and pass such a test soon after the staff gets back in the fall. Then constant checks on adherence to style are made. Those who are constantly in error are taken aside, reminded of the fact that this is an important component of the job, and given an opportunity to shape up. Remember that the accuracy and validity of a publication is judged by the style, spelling, and fact errors it contains. The reader assumes that if you cannot spell and/or make constant style errors, the facts reported probably aren't accurate either. Credability of a publication comes from the simple things.

Plans for an organized system of collecting information are needed. Then

the plan should be constantly stressed and people made aware that consistent performance on beats means consistent flow of information, and the long run those contacts will produce the big story.

Depth to coverage comes through routine, not flash-in-the-pan "let's do this today and assign whatever comes to mind" approaches. There is the need for a planning or futures book for each editor. During the summer, these people record the usual events that happen week by week during the year, then fill in new things as they are announced during the year. This way, the routine information does not become overlooked in the shuffle. Simply because the staff isn't interested in an activity is no reason for it not to be covered. A good example of this is that several years ago, a large Greek event, involving some 3,000 people, was not covered because the staff didn't think it was important. If 3,000 people participate in an event on a campus it has some news value, if nothing else than to show several photos and mention the size of the audience.

Putting out a publication is not a childhood game that can be treated lightly as "Oh well, it's just a college publication, so what's the difference." Unfortunately, that attitude comes home to roost when one seeks a job. It also cheats those people the publication serves. The publication's responsibility to inform is negated for the playtoy attitude of the staff. Again, the editor has much to do with the attitude the staff has toward the publication, its worth to them, and responsibility to the community.

Often, without strong editor leadership, sub-editors think of their departments as little autonomous publications. The editor should direct the sub-editors into the type of coverage that is desired. Then it's that sub-editor's job to do it.

For example, an editorial page editor should be writing editorials that carry out the editorial policy statement of the paper, not those that he or she personally wants.

Columnists should not be allowed to write free from editing and direction. The editor wants this type of column and the writer should know that some basic guidelines for quality and approach exist and will be enforeed. Having a column is not free license to do as the writer pleases. I have seen cases where the editor refused to discuss columns with the writer because of a belief that it violated the writer's first amendment right to publication after being invited to write.

The total content of the publication, including photographs, headlines, and letters to the editor are the editor's responsibility.

Moving on to the organization of the staff, it again becomes the editor's responsibility to design job descriptions that are functional for staff members. No staff position should be filled without a firm written job description. That staffer should have a copy and agree to it before being hired.

By the same token, the editor should not feel that because there has always been a particular position, that there will always be that position. If it has not functioned, then perhaps it's time to change. There should be flexibility in staff organization to set up positions that are needed and discard those that are not. Times change, and the functions on a publication change with the growth of the publication and the introduction of new equipment and methods. Oneeof the biggest problems with staff morale and performance is the do-nothing position. Someone is appointed to fill a slot that has no meaning or use simply because that person has been around for a

while. That usually means that the person does nothing in the slot as well.

Don't place someone in a title position simply because of seniority. Positions go to people who have and can perform in positions and carry out the directions the publication is to follow.

The staff should be on 30 day probation when the year starts. This allows the editor to observe performance and to evaluate that performance before the job is finally a person's for the year. After two weeks, each staffer deserves a performance review with suggestions for improvement. If improvements aren't forthcoming, then the person is moved at the end of 30 days. This is the fairest approach to all the staff. It also removes the middle-of-the-year problems with staffers who really haven't performed and have been allowed to make the same errors over and over again. At that point, the editor who has not evaluated staff early is faced with a tough task.

Staff positions should be appointed in the spring, soon after the editor selection process. Then staff members should know that they are expected to do several things over the summer to get ready for the job. They should be asked to send plans to the editor during the summer on the kinds of stories, series, and features they will want to include, plans for keeping the department staff involved and functioning, and a beat system for the department. They should know that they will be expected to pass a style and editing test, as well as be able to crop pictures, write heads, and design pages.

The editor should require that the staff return to campus about five days before the rest of the students return. This time will be used to go over plans made during the summer by the editor, educate the staff to new ways and directions, hold refresher seminars to get everyone up to speed, to plan

the first issues of the publication and to set goals. Good goals like shooting for awards, special coverage, design excellence, are a place to start.

During the summer, the editor must set deadlines, standards for the year, long and short range goals, and procedures for reaching these goals. A good example of things that editors can do are the design manual and style book from Illinois. All staffers and editors receive these manuals and must know them. It works, since The Daily Illini has won three awards from the Inland Press Association for design excellence.

At Indiana State, they have a design manual and style book for the yearbook staff. All members get these. Again, the seriousness with which one approaches the groundwork for educating that staff will reflect in the quality of the product.

Staff members who have guidelines and are expected to perform to those guidelines function better. The young staffers and new recruits should have a session on one of the days before class starts which takes them through some basics of writing and reporting. These should be seminars run by professors or professionals. It is suggested that the staff not do this type of training. The professionals are better equipped to dispense this sort of information and the sessions can serve as refreshers for the staff.

One effective session that I have seen included staff and recruits (those students recruited through letters to high school advisers, fliers to journalism majors, and information sheets used during freshman and transfer registration). The session began in a conference room holding

about 75-100 people. At 9:30 a.m. coffee and donuts were served and the editor and adviser welcomed the people. There was a basic "These are our editors and their jobs" session, a bit of background on the publication, and then an explanation of the day and its importance. The first speaker discussed interview techniques. The second speaker discussed basic writing styles and the use of quoted material. The third discussed photography in general terms.

After lunch, various school figures came and told about their areas and duties, including the president. Then the higher education reporter for an area newspaper discussed covering the campus and dealing with those people.

The final session included a tour of the offices and assigning new staffers to beats, editors, and stories. Everyone got a story the first day. This can be used for any publication.

From that first experience, many students stayed with the publication through the full four years of college. They knew the publication, how it worked, what the expectations were, and they realized that people were serious about quality and that they would have to work hard.

There is also a retreat or Saturday seminar plan which can be used later in September for new people which stresses the real nitty gritty of writing. It will give new staffers actual experience in a classroom with a pro giving assignments and critiquing them on the spot. This makes the process more effective, since in many cases it's hard for new writers to accept criticism from older staffers. It proves how serious the publication is about quality.

Another important part of the organization procedure is to hold several staff parties each year. The first should be at the beginning of school to help staffers from all departments get acquainted. Then a Christmas and

spring bash are helpful. There should always be the emphasis on a team approach to the publication.

The editor should work with the business operation in letting them know what the standards are for the editorial operation. In addition, there should be a cooperative spirit with the business department that allows the editorial people to help business out if needed and vice versa. One effective method for this is the weekly department heads meeting, where those involved in business, editorial, production, etc. discuss problems and plan for the future.

The editor must be familiar with the business operation to effectively work with the whole publication. The editor who ignores business is ignoring the source of funding for the operation of the publication. The staff must understand the importance of the business side and the editor has to be the one who interprets this for the staff.

There is another essential component in the organization and training function, and that is regular staff meetings. These must be held to discuss progress toward goals, single out good work, and point out errors and problems. This is vital to the success of the operation. Only an informed staff can operate efficiently. These meetings, usually weekly, keep the ball rolling. For a daily newspaper, it is important to have daily editor's meetings to plan the paper.

Daily planning meetings of 10-15 minutes assure quality coverage and play of good stories. It also allows for better input into the editorial opinions of the publication. This planning meeting should also deal with photography and design of the publication for the next day.

It is a way of keeping the editors informed of day to day coverage in all departments.

The last thing on the staff organization and training list is the most important to the publication---staff morale and acceptance of new staffers.

The editor must set the tone for keeping the publication offices out of the "good old boys" syndrome. The quickest way to scare away new staff members is with inside jokes, cracks about their work, and general cronyism.

Most new staffers come to the office with some fright of the old timers. If they are ignored or made fun of they will shy away. Whether you believe it or not, there is a certain awe of the editors among the new people. They are strangers and they feel insecure. The best newsrooms and publications operations stress working with new people, answering even the most stupid questions with patience and friendship. If the staff allows itself to segregate from the new people the staff for coming years will be smaller.

In addition, the word gets around that the publication staff is a group of asses. Remember that the publication staff is a fraternity without a pin and the ritual for membership is hard work and making it. But you should make it fairly easy to initiate new members through help and patience. When you're busy it is hard to be patient, but it pays off because there will be more trained people to do the jobs.

Good staff organization and training starts with the editor and his or her careful plans for organization and training sessions.